

CHIP bill moves forward in Senate

By ALAN SUDERMAN - Associated Press Writer - 01/25/07

HELENA — State lawmakers had a lengthy and at times contentious debate on the Senate floor Wednesday about the cost of a government-funded health insurance program for children, before endorsing the bill and forwarding it to a committee to analyze its cost.

At issue was a proposal by Sen. Dan Weinberg, D-Whitefish, to expand the Children's Health Insurance Program, which insures about 13,000 Montana children who live below 150 percent of the federal poverty line. Weinberg's bill was amended by John Esp, R-Big Timber, to expand the income level of those eligible for the program to 175 percent of the poverty level.

For a family of four, it would mean a jump in eligibility for households making \$30,000 a year to those making \$35,000.

About 80 percent of the funding would come from federal dollars, with the state making up about 20 percent of the cost.

"CHIP is a bargain; it is really a bargain," Weinberg said.

But some Republicans weren't so sure and wanted to know how much the bill would cost. The estimate from the governor's budget office put a \$12 million price tag on Weinberg's original bill. But there were no new fiscal estimates for the amended bill.

"Can you clue me in over here? Do you just vote on things when you don't know how much it's going to cost?" asked Sen. Roy Brown, R-Billings.

But Weinberg, who said earlier that he thought the original price estimate was overblown, said putting a price tag on CHIP was difficult.

"The truth is that CHIP is a moving target," Weinberg said. "There are a lot of variables involved."

Sen. Jerry O'Neil, R-Kalispell, and Sen. said they had more philosophical differences with the state-funded health care.

"It sounds great, it makes great press, but it's irresponsible," McGee said.

But some Democrats responded that funding health care for children was exactly what the government should do, especially in light of the estimated \$1 billion budget surplus.

"Let's cut to the chase," said Sen. Jim Elliott, D-Trout Creek. "We're talking about children, we're not talking about abstract ideas."

McGee responded: "I hope it is not the opinion of this Senate that if I vote no on this legislation that I am somehow against kids."

The bill passed the Senate 33-16 and was sent to the Senate Finance and Claims Committee for further consideration.

The bill is Senate bill 22.